

salvation is a deep dark well by Nokomis

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Can be read as pre-Nancy/Joyce, Gen, Misses Clause Challenge, post season two

Language: English

Characters: Joyce Byers, Nancy Wheeler

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-12-17

Updated: 2017-12-17

Packaged: 2022-04-03 14:49:25

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 2,670

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Nancy goes to Joyce with her suspicions that the Upside Down wasn't through with them yet.

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Author's Note:

- For [Snickfic](#).

Joyce looks startled when she opens her door to find Nancy there, but she doesn't hesitate before swinging the door open and welcoming her inside.

"Will's okay, right?" she asks. Nancy had popped her head in to check on the boys before leaving her house; they'd been well into a D&D session, oblivious and happy. She nods and follows Joyce inside.

"Here's the thing," Nancy says. She's not entirely sure that Joyce is the best choice, but right now she feels like the *only* choice. "I think that... I think that it's not over."

"What's not over?" Joyce asks, sounding as though she knows perfectly well what Nancy is talking about but is hoping desperately that she's wrong.

Joyce is rarely wrong, Nancy's noticed.

"The whole *thing*," Nancy says, gesturing towards the walls, which seem oddly empty without Christmas lights or scribbled-drawings covering every inch. "I think the Upside Down is still there."

"Of course it's still *there*," Joyce says. "The point is, it's not *here*."

"It's trying to be," Nancy says. "The boys don't know yet," she adds quickly, before Joyce can get more than a furrowed brow of motherly concern. She doesn't mention Jonathan; he's safely ensconced at NYU and no longer Nancy's concern. She'd drifted away from him the same way she'd drifted from Steve; sorrowful for the pain she'd caused them but feeling strangely disconnected from the situation herself.

"I don't understand," Joyce says, sitting heavily on the couch. "It's over. I mean, the lab is gone, the rift is healed. We're *safe*. We've been safe for two *years*."

"I don't think we have been," Nancy says. She digs into her rucksack and pulls out the folder, the one she's been painstakingly adding to for the past six months. Nothing substantial had filled it until the previous week, and now the weight of it feels strangely leaden as she sets it in Joyce's hands. "Look at this."

The seismographic reports hadn't been precisely easy to obtain, but it had been worth the trouble.

"There have been minor earthquakes happening with increasing regularity in this area," Nancy says, shifting through the papers until she found the map she'd marked up. "See? Nothing major enough to warrant a news story, but strong enough to set off the sensors. And they're all focused directly in the Hawkins area, but the epicenters are changing. They're not centered on the lab."

She'd hoped that the lab would provide an easy location to focus on, but life was never easy.

Joyce's brow furrows. "Is that..?"

Nancy nods. "The quarry."

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The water is inky-black and and limitless as the night sky, burbling quietly against the shore.

"How do we tell?" Joyce whispers, voice soft and almost nervous. It's too dark to see much beyond their flashlights, and Nancy is keeping hers aimed at the path in front of her, unwilling to take a sudden stumble into the water. They should have waited until daybreak, but Joyce couldn't afford to miss work.

Nancy was obscurely grateful that they had immediately sprung into action. She'd already spent too many nights staring at her ceiling, remembering how the darkness had felt beyond the rift.

"I think we should go to the beach where they found--" she cuts off before she finishes the sentence. Will is safe, but she remembers the quiet dread that filled the days following the discovery of the body that turned out to be fake, and the haunted look that crosses Joyce's

face whenever she hears the phrase ‘zombie boy.’

Joyce nods briskly and without hesitation takes the next path that forks left. They arrive at the rocky shore quickly after that. Nancy almost bumps into Joyce as she comes to a sudden stop, rocks skittering away from her sneakers, sounding as loud as gunshots in the quiet night.

The water here is just as dark as it had appeared from a distance, but this close, Nancy realizes why she’d noticed the burbling sound. It was *wrong*, in a way that sent shivers down her spine. The water should be lapping gently against the shore, a quiet sound that she’d heard a thousand times on picnics and swimming excursions.

Instead, the water was churning, bubbling up from underneath. It almost looked as though the entire reservoir was *boiling*.

“That’s definitely a disturbance,” Joyce says, sweeping her flashlight’s beam over the water. The churning and bubbling continues out as far as the light beam does, and Nancy pulls her denim jacket even closer to herself, chilled to the core.

Joyce seems to be feeling the same dread, as she wraps her arms tightly around herself, directing her flashlight to the closest bit of shore.

“What could cause this?” Nancy wonders aloud. She wishes her brother were here; she’d purposefully kept him from danger, but the kid had a mind like no other, and she could use some of his theories right now. None of hers are worth much.

“I don’t suppose the town’s installed a giant hot tub,” Joyce says.

“Seems unlikely,” Nancy agrees.

“But...” Joyce tucks her arms even closer to her body. “It can’t be *boiling*. We would be able to feel that kind of heat from here.”

Nancy realizes with a start that that was true. If anything, the temperature had dropped, but she’d paid enough attention in science class to know that that should cause the water molecules to slow down, not increase their movement.

Joyce crouches down by the water's edge. "It feels cold," she says, dipping her fingers into the water. "Like it did--"

And then, abruptly, Joyce was gone.

Nancy calls out her name, frantically, because Joyce had been there, just a few scant feet away from her on the beach, and Nancy hadn't done so much as *blink* but Joyce had disappeared fully. As fully as--

As fully as Nancy had, when she'd crept through that tree.

"No," she breathes out, as panic begins to simmer. She steps closer to the shore where Joyce had been moments before. "Joyce! Joyce!"

No response, save for the soft sound of the water bubbling.

"Shit," Nancy says, looking around desperately. The quarry was dark and still. There was nowhere for Joyce to have gone except...

Nancy edges closer to the water. It's dark and churning even more now, as though Joyce were attempting to break free from the other side of some barrier. Nancy's options are limited; she could rush back to town and try to find help, risking Joyce becoming lost forever in the meantime, or she can just try to save Joyce herself.

She's been through before. It's been years, but the eeriness of the Upside Down still haunts her dreams. If Jonathan hadn't acted so quickly... She knew that she would have been lost like Barb. She can't let that happen again, not to Joyce. She crouches down, and takes a deep breath. She's reaching her hand out to touch the water, just as Joyce had, when she remembers her rucksack.

She dashes over to it. She'd packed an assortment of things she thought might be useful, and nestled inside amongst the bullets and batteries is a length of coiled rope.

It only takes a moment to tie one end to a tree and another to her waist, tucking a pocket knife in easy reach in her pocket just in case she actually ends up underwater.

Somehow she thinks she won't.

Before she can change her mind, Nancy reaches out just as Joyce had and touches the water. It's surprisingly cool, given that it appears to be boiling, and feels strangely thick and viscous against her hand. It almost feels as though it's grasping back at her, reaching towards her and--

She's tugged forward, and she's gone.

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When she opens her eyes, she's in the Upside Down.

The air is full of floating particles, just like before, only this time instead of ashes, they're oily and dark, like bubbles that she recoils from, rather than wanting to pop. The ground is soft and sucks at her shoes as she takes a step forward. Her flashlight, miraculously, still works, and she casts her beam of light around, trying to take in her surroundings.

Nothing, nothing and... there, lying on the ground, a few dozen yards away. Nancy runs over to Joyce's still form, hoping against hope.

She touches her face gently, and Joyce's eyes pop open.

"Oh god," Nancy gasps, "you're alive!" Relief floods through her.

Joyce gasps, coughing as she struggles to sit up. Nancy helps her into a sitting position and sits beside her. Joyce sags against her, breathing heavily as she catches her breath. "What-- where are we?"

"The other side of the quarry," Nancy says. From here she realizes that it's so dark here not simply because they're in the Upside Down, but because instead of the sky above their heads there's a dark, bubbling mass. Nancy doesn't know how it's remaining in the sky, why it isn't splashing down on them, but the air is thick with moisture and bone-chilling cold, and she's grateful for the warm weight of Joyce against her.

"How do we get back?" Panic tinges Joyce's voice; she's an emotional woman, but it doesn't hinder her. She's already looking around, following the beam from Nancy's flashlight trying to seek out an escape.

"I don't know..." Nancy starts before remembering the rope around her waist. "Wait." She tugs at it experimentally. There's tension, enough to give her hope that her knots are still in place around the tree back in Hawkins.

"You brilliant girl," Joyce says, wrapping Nancy in an entirely unexpected hug. "Come on."

Joyce stumbles a bit as she climbs to her feet -- she's obviously hurting somehow, but seems determined to not mention it. Escape is too important right now; Nancy will worry about injuries once they're back.

She follows the rope back into the darkness, feeling the ground slope gently uphill under her feet. In Hawkins they would be underwater, swimming towards the shore; here, they're simply trekking through more of the same endless darkness. She can't see the end of the rope, even though by now they should be to the shore.

"It shouldn't be much further," she says aloud, trying to sound reassuring for Joyce.

"Shouldn't be and is are very different things here," Joyce mutters. Nancy steals a glance over at her. Joyce's eyes are narrowed and determined, like every step is a battle. Nancy leans in closer and loops her arm around Joyce's waist.

"Yeah, but we've both made it out before," Nancy points out. "This place can suck it."

That startles a laugh out of Joyce, and Nancy thinks it's a rib that's bothering her because she falters before resuming her determined walk. They've walked much farther now than Nancy did when she arrived, and she doesn't know how to bring up the idea that they might be lost while following a literal lifeline when they, abruptly, see the end of the rope.

It disappears inside a gnarled tree. Nancy runs to it and tries to push against the bark, tries to loosen a hole in the fabric of the world, but to no avail.

“No,” she says, under her breath, tugging even harder at the bark, trying to pry it off with her fingernails, as though that will somehow open a rift to allow them to return. As if she can wrench apart the tree with her own bare hands.

Joyce’s hand is feather-light on her wrist, but when her fingers close around Nancy’s skin she stops. “We’ll find our way out,” Joyce says, quiet and serene. She’s looking around, and her expression is strange-- it’s like she’s marvelling at the world they’re in.

“This is the way out,” Nancy says, jerking on the rope. It’s stuck fast.

“There’s always another way,” Joyce says. She’s so far from the panicked, desperate Joyce that Nancy has become accustomed to seeing during times of crisis, and her disbelief is apparently written on her face, because Joyce says, “I know I’m taking this well, it’s just...” She looks around wonderingly. “I can feel him here, like he’s still echoing through the air.”

Nancy blinks a few times, then realizes what Joyce is talking about. “Will?”

Joyce nods. She gingerly lowers herself to the ground, leaning against the tree. “You know how he’s been.”

Nancy nods; Mike’s even talked to her about how Will sometimes gets strange and distant, even though his connection to the Upside Down has been eradicated. “Mike worries.”

Joyce lets out a half-laugh. “Mike’s not the only one. But my boy survived here, so I’m sure as hell not going to let it defeat me.” Her gaze drifts off to where the lake should be, at the dark strange mass that hovers in the air there. “Wait. Those reports, the ones about the earthquakes. There have been a lot, right?”

“Right,” Nancy says slowly.

“This tree can’t be the only crack,” Joyce says confidently. “Not if the earthquakes have been the Upside Down breaking into our world.”

Joyce was right, of course. Nancy let out a breath. “They were clustered together, so there should be another crack nearby.”

She shouldn't be happy that more of the Upside Down was leaking into their world, but it was going to be their salvation. She was even grateful for the fact that the veil between the worlds was apparently thin here, because it allowed her the chance to get Joyce out safely. Joyce seemed determined to not mention her injury, but Nancy could hear the way her breath kept catching in her throat.

"Stay here," she says, gazing around. "I'll look for another rift."

"No," Joyce says, pushing herself to her feet, bracing herself against the tree and looking as though the motion had taken a lot out of her. "I'm not letting you go alone."

She reaches out and takes Nancy's hand. Her touch is gentle and reassuring, and Nancy finds herself tightening the grip.

She doesn't let go, not as they walk along the shoreline, not as they peer into the darkness that gathers around the plants, trying to find some glimmer of life.

Finally, finally, she sees it. A singular beam of light, motes of dark particles floating around it but never through it. "There," she breathes, and feels Joyce's hand clench around her own.

"Let's go home," Joyce says.

It's not easy, but they make it. They make it home.

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Knowledge that the rifts are there and all-consuming spurs them into action. Nancy wants to keep the boys safe and ignorant, but it's just not feasible. Once Eleven knows, they know.

Joyce sits straight-backed in a chair at her table as they share their discovery with Hopper and Eleven. Nancy gets up and fills Joyce's coffee cup twice during the discussion; Joyce's ribs are just cracked, she's not in any true danger, but Nancy doesn't like seeing her in pain.

"I'll close it," Eleven says quietly.

“No,” Hopper says protectively. “You know what it cost last time.”

“It will cost a lot more if you don’t,” Nancy says. “We have to stop this before it gets any worse.”

Eleven nods.

Hopper lays his hand on her shoulder. “We can find another way.”

“You don’t have to do this alone,” Joyce says.

Eleven blinks, and says slowly, “No, I don’t.”

A halting story comes out of her about a secret sister, and Nancy feels something rising in her that feels like hope. Eleven could share the burden, and they could close the rift for good.

She smiles, and catches Joyce doing the same. They’re going to do this. They’re going to make this town safe for everyone they love.

“I’ll find her,” she promises Eleven. “I’ll find your sister.”

“We will,” Joyce adds, reaching out and grasping Eleven’s hand in her own. The motion has to hurt her damaged ribs, but Joyce doesn’t so much as flinch. “We’re going to do everything we can to help you.”

They do.